



*United States Attorney
Southern District of New York*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JUNE 23, 2004

CONTACT: U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
MARVIN SMILON, HERBERT HADAD,
MEGAN GAFFNEY
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE
(212) 637-2600

MARK THORN
(646) 313-2716

**ART DEALER PLEADS GUILTY IN U.S. COURT
TO CUSTOMS VIOLATION IN IRANIAN ANTIQUITY CASE**

DAVID N. KELLEY, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and MARTIN D. FICKE, Special Agent in Charge, New York, Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, announced today that HICHAM ABOUTAAM, a prominent art dealer, pled guilty in Manhattan federal court to charges of illegally importing an Iranian antiquity valued at close to \$1 million into the United States.

According to a criminal Complaint previously filed in the case, ABOUTAAM is a principal in Phoenix Ancient Art, S.A., a well-known antiquities firm located in Geneva, Switzerland. In about March 1999, a New York collector ("the Collector") visited ABOUTAAM in Geneva to discuss the purchase of a ceremonial drinking vessel described as a Pre-Achaemenid or Mesopotamian Silver Rhyton in the shape of a griffin,

c. 700 B.C. ("the Silver Griffin"). ABOUTAAM advised the Collector that the Silver Griffin was authentic and was originally from Iran. According to the Complaint, the Collector did not agree to purchase the object until she was fully satisfied as to its authenticity, and ABOUTAAM agreed to endeavor to obtain such assurances for her.

According to the Complaint, on February 9, 2000, ABOUTAAM hand-carried the Silver Griffin on a flight from Zurich, Switzerland, to Newark International Airport in Newark, New Jersey. According to charges filed in the case, the commercial invoice submitted to the Customs Service in connection with the entry of the Silver Griffin falsely stated that the object's country of origin was Syria.

According to the Complaint, subsequent to the importation of the object, ABOUTAAM obtained three separate expert opinions from metallurgists which verified that the Silver Griffin was authentic and of Iranian origin. Two of the experts noted in their reports that the Silver Griffin was consistent with objects from a location known as the Western Cave, a site in Iran's Luristan province which was believed to contain a number of important artifacts dating from the 1st millennium B.C. According to the Complaint, between 1989 and 1992, the cave was reported to be completely plundered and severely damaged by villagers and treasure hunters. According to the Complaint,

since 1989, Iranian authorities have endeavored to retrieve objects looted from the Western Cave. The Complaint states that over the years, a number of objects purportedly from the Western Cave have reportedly been smuggled out of Iran and have ended up in art galleries, museums, auction houses and private collections in a number of other countries including Turkey, Japan, France, England, Switzerland and the United States.

According to the Complaint, the Collector confirmed to law enforcement agents that she received copies of the expert reports commissioned by ABOUTAAM and subsequently agreed to purchase the Silver Griffin, in about June 2002, for approximately \$950,000.

The Silver Griffin is presently in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security pursuant to a federal seizure warrant issued in December 2003.

ABOUTAAM was initially arrested on the charges in the Complaint in December 2003.

ABOUTAAM pled guilty today before United States Magistrate Judge RONALD L. ELLIS to a one-count misdemeanor Information, filed on June 14, 2004, charging him with presenting a commercial invoice to a Customs Officer which falsely represented that the Silver Griffin came from Syria. The charge in the Information carries a maximum sentence of one year in

prison and a maximum fine of \$100,000. ABOUTAAM is scheduled to be sentenced on July 20, 2004.

Mr. KELLEY praised the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office in New York, for its investigation of this case.

Assistant United States Attorneys EVAN T. BARR and JANE LEVINE are in charge of the case.

04-132

###